
New Hampshire
Department of Agriculture,
Markets & Food

Unwelcome Winter Guests

By Chris Rallis
Division of Plant Industry
NH Dept. of Agriculture, Markets & Food

As the temperatures get cooler in late summer into autumn, several insects begin to search for places to overwinter, and in the process, invade our homes. The New Hampshire Department of Agriculture receives many calls from concerned homeowners from autumn through spring regarding these home invaders. The insects crawl into cracks and crevices in siding, windows, foundations, and roof vents of houses. During warm, sunny days in winter or early spring, these insects may become active and head toward windows and lights, frequently moving into the interior of homes. They do no structural damage, do not feed, and do not attack people, but they can be a nuisance because of their odor, fecal matter, or merely by their presence in the house. In some uncommon cases, allergies to these insects can pose a more serious problem.

Four of the more common home invaders are the cluster flies, lady beetles, boxelder bugs, and the western conifer seed bugs. Cluster flies resemble house flies, but are larger, clumsy, and slow. They are often seen on warm winter and spring days flying or crawling around lights and windows. Cluster flies parasitize earth worms, so they may be present wherever there are significant numbers of earthworms. Large numbers of cluster flies often gather in attic windows on warm winter or spring days. A temporary solution is to open the windows during warm periods to allow the flies to escape.

During the past 10 to 20 years, the multicolored Asian lady beetle has become a nuisance pest, with thousands of lady beetles entering homes and buildings each autumn. When lady beetles are disturbed, they emit a fluid that has a foul odor and can stain surfaces such as drapes and carpets. It is best to sweep or vacuum lady beetles, and either kill them or keep them in a cold dark area, such as an unheated garage or shed, for release in the spring. In some uncommon cases, respiratory allergies or allergies to the body fluid have been reported.

Western conifer seed bugs originated from the west coast, but eventually spread eastward along the range of their coniferous tree hosts, which include white, red, and Scotch pine. The bugs have been gradually dispersing in New Hampshire for the past several years. Western conifer seed bugs belong to the family of leaf-footed bugs, so named because of a flattened leaf-like area on the hind legs. Adult bugs are $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch in length, brown, with long elbowed antennae, and a faint white zigzag line across the middle of their backs. When they lift their wings to fly, they expose bright yellow-orange patches on their bodies. These bugs will give off a pungent odor from scent glands if disturbed.

The boxelder bug sometimes enters homes in autumn in large numbers. The adult is about $\frac{1}{2}$ inch long, and black with red stripes behind the head and on its wings. The body beneath the wings is also bright red. At the onset of autumn, these bugs will crawl or fly up to 2 miles to find shelter. The bugs seem to prefer light colored buildings, where they will sun in large numbers on the south or west facing wall. Boxelder bugs also release pungent odors from scent glands when disturbed, and their fecal matter will stain some surfaces, but the bugs are otherwise harmless. Boxelder bugs breed and feed primarily on female, seed-bearing boxelder trees, so an effective preventative control is to remove any of these trees.

Most of the control strategies for these insects focus on prevention. *Before* the onset of autumn, repair, caulk, or screen all areas that may provide access to the home, such as around doors, windows, foundations, crawl spaces, attics, and roof vents. Clear excess debris such as stone, wood, or leaf piles from around the house. Professional exterminators may provide some control with insecticides applied before the insects enter the structure. Once in the building, black-light traps may be effective in trapping some insects in dark spaces such as attics or basements.

For more information contact the Division of Plant Industry, NH Dept. of Agriculture, Markets & Food, PO Box 2042, Concord, NH 03302-2042, tel. 271-2561, email: crallis@agr.state.nh.us.

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